

## **Correspondence in Opposition to the Great Lakes State Park from Cris Kohl**

### **Email of transmission:**

From: SeawolfRex@aol.com  
Sent: Tue 5/29/07 12:58 PM

Dear scuba diver or interested recipient:

I just realized that I sent out my e-mail attachment without placing ".doc" at the end of it.

Hopefully it will work this time. It is being sent to much smaller groupings of recipients.

So -- here is my response to the shapers of this proposed legislation, as well as to others.

Please forward this to anyone you think may have an interest in this topic.

### **Text of letter in opposition:**

Dear Legislators, Scuba Divers, Scuba Businesses, Maritime Historians, and Anyone Else Whom This May Concern:

Re: proposed legislation affecting scuba diving on shipwrecks in the state of Michigan.

Note: Since this letter is coming from me, and I have considerable experience to bring to the table, you will see the word "I" a lot. Please be patient.

My qualifications: I wrote my first of several hundred articles about diving on Great Lakes shipwrecks in my first dive club's newsletters in the early 1980's. I wrote my first of eleven books about scuba diving on Great Lakes shipwrecks 22 years ago, in 1985, and I have since become a full-time writer. I have explored the underwater world since 1974, and I took my first underwater archaeology course in 1982-1983. I have a Master of Arts degree in History, specializing in Great Lakes Maritime History. In the 1980's and 1990's, when I entered photo contests, I won several prizes for my underwater photography, a number of those prizes coming from Michigan. I recently contributed a chapter to the upcoming shipwreck book by Dr. John Halsey, the Michigan State Archaeologist.

I served on the Board of Directors of the Ontario Underwater Council for nine years (1988-1997), and on the Executive Board of the Underwater Archaeological Society of Chicago for four years (2001-2004), including as that group's President (2004).

For the last quarter of a century, I have been undauntingly encouraging and heavily promoting scuba diving in the Great Lakes, even though I never called it "scuba tourism." But that is definitely what it is. I have done this through my eleven shipwreck books, hundreds of magazine and newsletter articles, and over 1,200 presentations which I have made, mostly in the Great Lakes area, but also in more distant venues such as New York City, Montreal, Boston, and Houston, to let the world know what excellent shipwreck diving we have in our freshwater seas. My wife (Joan Forsberg) and I publish a quarterly newsletter called "Shipwrecks! The Great Lakes and Beyond...."

I have also been fortunate to have explored shipwrecks off North Carolina, Florida, Hawaii, Tahiti, New Zealand, and Australia, so I am in a strong position to compare them to Great Lakes shipwrecks. I have been able to compare shipwreck notes with many of the world's topnotch shipwreck divers. I have interviewed most of the people who have located Great Lakes shipwrecks in the past 30 years, when I was not busy researching, and occasionally finding and identifying, shipwrecks myself.

With my extensive and varied experiences to help me form judgments, I am asking you to consider my opinions.

I have invited scuba businesses to be a part of one of my books, which also happens to be my most successful in terms of sales: the 412-page THE GREAT LAKES DIVING GUIDE. It is the only one of my books into which we invite scuba business advertising. In the first edition of that book back in the year 2001, we printed 33 paid ads from scuba businesses in the state of Michigan. That was excellent response! But for my enlarged 2007 second edition, we have received, with much difficulty, only 21 ads from Michigan. Meanwhile, EVERY OTHER GREAT LAKES STATE HAS INCREASED, or kept the same, the number of scuba ads taken out, most dramatically from Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, and the province of Ontario. One must conclude that things are going better for scuba diving in those Great Lakes states than in Michigan.

I know that Michigan is hurting financially, due in part to the rusting automotive industry. I myself spent half a year when I was a younger man working on the assembly line at Ford's in my original home town of Windsor, Ontario, and I have older cousins living in the Flint-Saginaw area who worked all their lives in nearby automotive plants, so I can relate to the plight of automotive workers. One Michigan scuba dive shop owner told me recently that over 100,000 people have fled Michigan in the past three years, cutting seriously into the state's tax base. This economic turmoil has to have negatively affected scuba diving in Michigan.

I have longtime and firsthand experience checking the pulse of scuba businesses in the Great Lakes. I have visited most of the scuba dive shops in the Great Lakes area in the

past two years, as I have been doing regularly since the mid-1980's. I telephone those which I have not had a chance to visit recently.

I cannot see how your proposed legislation is going to create the miracle needed to bring people (back) into scuba diving in Michigan. For the past 25 years, I have been giving Great Lakes scuba diving an increasingly visible profile on regional, national and international levels, and I have not seen our inland seas attract anywhere near the numbers of divers which, say, Florida gets annually.

And I can tell you that all of my experiences leave me stymied as to how the state of Michigan is going to attract more scuba divers to its submerged cultural resources if they start charging a \$15 fee. People are no longer diving in the numbers that we had 20 years ago. It was free then, as it is now. Will charging them \$15 a person have them flocking there in herds, or schools? Is there a solid plan that I don't know about which will put this money to successful "scuba tourism" use?

WHAT will the State of Michigan do to attract scuba divers to its waters? There has to be more – much more – or this money-charging proposal will just not work. We have to be realistic here. Michigan might end up driving away scuba divers – into the eager, open arms of Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Ontario and other parts of the Great Lakes, each of which would be more than willing to let visiting scuba divers dive on the fabulous shipwrecks there for free! (Yes, the other Great Lakes states and the province of Ontario all have shipwrecks which are just as excellent as the ones in Michigan, so don't shoot yourselves in the foot).

Beware of statistics – especially those coming out of tropical tourist destinations such as Florida, or any other diver destination. The cold, often dark waters of the Great Lakes, with a scuba dive season only half as long as Florida's, are definitely not as appealing as warm, tropical waters. The Great Lakes are not Florida, and never will be, and that's that. It is absolutely pointless to try to compare the two, very much like comparing apples and oranges (a suitable simile/metaphor combination in this case). What we have in the Great Lakes is unique (the best preserved shipwrecks in the world, as I have been advertising for decades), but the scuba diving here is challenging compared to the ease of dropping off the back of a boat in the Cayman Islands into calm water only a quarter of a mile from shore wearing only a bathing suit and lightweight scuba gear without any encapsulating wetsuit or cumbersome drysuit.

I suggest that Legislators take time to glance through the two most popular scuba diving magazines in the world: Sport Diver Magazine (circulation 204,000) and Scuba Diving (circulation 197,000). Both are monthly or near-monthly U.S. publications available at scuba dive shops as well as Barnes & Noble and Borders, and neither magazine has ever published much about Great Lakes diving. I have written Great Lakes shipwreck articles for each one, but I'm lucky to get them to accept one a year from me on that topic. By far, they want articles about warm-water, tropical destinations, like Florida and the Caribbean or the Pacific, and they always have been much more interested in those destinations because more divers spend more money at tropical sites than in the Great

Lakes. Remember the Jacques Cousteau television specials of the 1960's, showing colorful coral and excellent visibility in that warm water? THAT represents, to this day, the reality of the bulk of scuba diving dollars. Even most Great Lakes scuba divers "go south" regularly (in fact, I wrote my first book in 1985 because I saw too many of my dive buddies hang up their fins and save their scuba certification cards for their one trip down south every year, and I wanted to make them aware of the excellent diving we have in our own back yard – the Great Lakes.)

However, we have to face economic reality, and the only way for scuba dive shops in the Great Lakes to stay in business is to offer tropical trips in the wintertime, even if it means spoiling their divers, who, when they return, may not want to dive the Great Lakes ever again.

If you visit a few Michigan dive shops and ask them where they set up dive trips in the past year, some of them will be able to tell you about their Great Lakes weekend trips last summer, but all of them will give you their tropical destinations during the winter months. And they bluntly admit that they make much more money on the tropical trips than on the Great Lakes ones. So, to be realistic about our situation here in the inland seas, tropical scuba dive trips HAVE to be included in any discussion of GREAT LAKES SCUBA TOURISM. But Great Lakes diving by itself will never, ever bring as much scuba tourism or diver dollars as most tropical destinations see.

The concept of sinking commercial or military ships for the express purpose of creating new scuba dive sites is a good idea and has been around for decades – with ships originally sunk in Florida and Hawaii in the 1970's and 1980's. The Great Lakes sank its first ship at Kingston, Ontario in September, 1985, and it was an immediate success, planted upright and in a weather-protected area. Since then, three more ships have been sunk in the province of Ontario, Illinois sank two, and Michigan sank one, namely the "Steven M. Selvick" tugboat in June, 1996, up near Munising. (I am not considering the Coast Guard vessel "Mesquite" because it sank naturally first, was considered a total loss, and was simply moved the next year into deeper waters.) All of these purposely sunk ships have seen great success in attracting visiting scuba divers. They are shipwrecks which still look like ships, a situation which makes shipwreck divers very happy, because most natural shipwrecks have been down a long time and have corroded and disintegrated to some degree. The existence of these newly-made shipwreck sites has also taken the strain of over-visitation off many of our natural, older submerged cultural resources. (In Florida, over-visitation by divers has destroyed nearly all the coral in Pennekamp Underwater State Park at Key Largo; a few of our popular Great Lakes shipwrecks have felt a similar impact).

I was involved with the sinking of the largest ship to date in the Great Lakes, the 1928 passenger and automobile ferry from Michigan called "The Straits of Mackinac." After much personal expense in towing, docking, and cleaning the old ship, costs paid mostly by Chicago dive shop owner Patrick Hammer, "The Straits of Mackinac" was towed out and sunk several miles off Chicago on April 10, 2003. It immediately became the most visited shipwreck off Chicago, and continues to be so to this day. Two commercial ships

were purposely sunk at Tobermory in 1990 and 1999, and immediately found great popularity among visiting divers, but they had to be sunk just barely outside the Fathom Five National Park boundaries because the park would not allow them to be scuttled in park waters.

Perhaps Michigan will use any collected money to do what other states/province have done for shipwrecks, besides sinking a ship as a dive site. The state of Wisconsin has a unique program called "Wisconsin Underwater Trails." No, they have not left anything underwater for scuba divers to follow; they have set up large, colorful signs on the edge of the shore close to where an interesting shipwreck is known to lie. Each large sign shows an archival photo of the ship before it became a shipwreck, plus several underwater photos in color, plus a drawing of the state survey done of that shipwreck site, plus enough text to tell the shipwreck's story. This is particularly evident on a few signs in popular Door County, WI. This allows scuba divers and the non-diving public alike to appreciate the maritime history which lies out there in close proximity. I appreciate programs like this all the more whenever I hear the words, "There are shipwrecks out there?!?" from someone living here in the Great Lakes (and I hear that far too often!)

The province of Ontario has used money to help train volunteer archaeology helpers who belong to the two maritime conservation groups which were formed there in the early 1980's, namely Save Ontario Shipwrecks (S.O.S.) and Preserve Our Wrecks (P.O.W.). Both volunteer groups were started by scuba divers who were concerned that Ontario's shipwrecks, which were being pilfered piecemeal by scuba diving souvenir hunters, would eventually disappear. They realized that historic shipwrecks are a non-renewable resource, and they decided that education was the best solution. Since then, these groups have held maritime conservation forums annually. Also, these volunteer groups working with the provincial government have placed 500-pound concrete mooring blocks 20 to 30 feet away from each shipwreck, and each spring, volunteers go out and place mooring lines to iron "eyes" on these blocks, and recover the lines in the fall. The block stays there permanently. The old method of tying mooring lines onto some part of the shipwreck itself has resulted in damage to the shipwreck, and dragging anchors into the shipwreck in an attempt to find it so that divers can dive on it also led to damage done to the shipwreck.

Would Michigan consider establishing something like Wisconsin's "Underwater Trails" program to educate the public about maritime history, or to spending money on 500 pound concrete blocks and having them placed near fragile shipwrecks to make diver access not only easier, but unharmed to the shipwreck?

Billboards promoting Michigan shipwreck diving are also a thought. Tom Farnquist of the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point firmly believes in the power of advertising, especially in the use of billboards. And he must be doing something right. His remote museum way up in Michigan's Upper Peninsula gets ten times more visitors than the average Great Lakes maritime museum anywhere else. And he's open only six months of the year, compared to year-round for nearly all of the other museums.

I have never waived from my original goal. I have written numerous books and magazine articles to entice divers to explore the wonders of the Great Lakes. Despite these efforts, the number of Great Lakes scuba divers actively exploring the Great Lakes has decreased in the past 15 years. Many local divers reached their 50's and 60's and decided they didn't want to work that hard any more to have fun underwater (hence the trips to the tropics now more than ever). Younger divers are not replenishing the dwindling ranks of older divers like they used to – for one, there are too many attention-grabbing, time-consuming, electronic distractions for younger people today (internet, I-pods, DVD's, on-demand television, cell phones, etc.) Many Great Lakes dive shops nowadays do the classroom and swimming pool training for scuba courses in the Great Lakes region, while the actual open water tests themselves are ultimately conducted during trips down to the tropics. This certainly is NOT preparing those new divers for exploring the Great Lakes!

If only your \$15 fee could clearly, directly and totally be used to attract younger divers to explore the Great Lakes! It might find more support then. Or if you had a solid plan to use the money from this proposed legislation to create new shipwreck sites, perhaps one in each of the underwater preserves, it might help win over support. But if such plans are not possible, then the money will simply be viewed as a desperate, short-term solution to Michigan's serious economic woes. But it would amount to a band-aid being used to heal a lost arm.

I see nothing but problems in collecting and administering this “voluntary donation” of \$15.00 annually from every scuba diver exploring Michigan waters. Did the Legislators ask a wide variety and a large number of Michigan dive shop owners and scuba charter boat operators what they think of their proposed legislation?

I beg the Legislators, before you pass laws which will not serve any meaningful and identifiable “scuba tourism” purpose, to take intense and realistic looks at what has NOT worked in the Great Lakes in recent years. Let me give you a couple of examples.

The very first underwater park or preserve was established in (sorry, Michigan) the province of Ontario at Tobermory in 1972. The Tobermory underwater park, called Fathom Five, was first a provincial park, but it became a national (federal) park in 1987. Mandatory diver registration (which was free since the 1970's) allowed accurate numbers to be ascertained. At its peak in the 1980's, Tobermory had over 8,000 divers visiting annually (and that's only from May to October – remember the short season in the Great Lakes compared to Florida!), and each diver did an average of 4 dives. That's a lot of airfills, charter boat business, accommodations, meals and equipment. No place in the entire Great Lakes has ever come close to doing that amount of scuba diving business. But Tobermory is unique, even for the Great Lakes; their 21 shipwreck sites are all within five miles of the harbor of Tobermory, so the boat rides are short; most of these wrecks lie in good visibility water and are relatively shallow and attract novice and intermediate divers – trying to attract more advanced technical divers, which form a very small minority of all scuba divers, would hardly make a dent in most scuba businesses; nine charters boats are kept busy at Tobermory on every summer weekend; you can go scuba

diving right at the base of a historic lighthouse as a shore dive; government workers at Tobermory buoy the wreck sites each spring, and remove the buoys each autumn; many quaint motels and restaurants are within easy walking distance of the scuba dive charter boat docks, and two dive shops sit a half a block apart right at the harbor. And the entire town, full-time population about 800, sits at the end of a long road on the tip of a peninsula surrounded by northern wilderness and water. It offers a perfect idyllic escape for a weekend of scuba diving. No other place in the Great Lakes, except perhaps Munising, Michigan, comes close to such a perfect setting for scuba divers.

In 1990, Fathom Five underwater park at Tobermory began charging an annual \$7.00 fee from each person who went diving there. Business fell off dramatically. I remember scuba dive shops in Michigan canceling Tobermory charters (which had been very popular weekend escapes for many Michigan divers) because of that \$7.00 fee. Tobermory scuba business fell by more than 30% the first year because of that fee, and it has never recovered to anywhere near its former level. They dropped from 8,000+ divers a year in the late 1980's to about 5,000 in 2006 (for divers who just visit once, they have instigated a one-day park diver registration fee of \$4.95, and a two-day, like a weekend, fee of \$9.90, while the annual fee is up to \$19.80 for 2007. These fees are given in Canadian currency). But Tobermory remains an exceptional diver destination in the Great Lakes, and, not surprisingly, many Michigan dive shops have returned to offering weekend dive trips to Tobermory (their other most popular weekend escapes in the Great Lakes are Munising, the Manitous, Sanilac Shores, Alpena, the Straits of Mackinac, and Whitefish Point.)

In the early 1990's the town of Leamington, Ontario, on the northwest shore of Lake Erie, saw a way to improve its economy. If they were to take over the "stewardship" of the dozen or so popular shipwrecks off their shoreline, they could create an underwater park like Tobermory's. Statistics were brought to the table: Tobermory took in an estimated three million dollars annually from scuba divers. That fact was more than enough for the local non-diving politicians; Leamington would become another Tobermory! The underwater park called ErieQuest (not a national or even a provincial park, but a municipal one) was formed, and the town of Leamington took over "stewardship" of certain shipwrecks, with the blessings of the Ontario government, within a 15-mile radius of town. But soft-bottomed western Lake Erie surrounded by tamed farmlands is a far cry from the unique situation of Tobermory in the semi-wilderness of rock-bottomed northern Lake Huron. Neither the shipwrecks nor the setting nor the water visibility are considered as "good" as those at Tobermory. For all the studies and consideration and money that the town of Leamington put into their underwater park, nowhere near the anticipated three million dollars a year from scuba divers comes to that town.

Michigan has to consider, of course, that charging a diving fee to explore shipwrecks which lie under the "stewardship" of any group, whether town, park, or state, opens that group up to liability issues if there is ever a scuba diving accident there. But I will not even begin discussing that probability, although Michigan legislators should be aware of it.

I hope you have found this informative. My only other hope is that you approach this with as much information about the topic of Great Lakes scuba diving as possible. I would be happy to provide you with more information in whatever form you want: speaking with you on the telephone about any of these matters, or even sending you books.

Please don't make it harder or more costly or more complicated to scuba dive in Michigan waters. Make it easier and more welcoming, or leave it alone.

In recent times, a popular U.S. President begged, "Please, Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall." I am asking Michigan Legislators not to build a wall.

Thank you.

Cris Kohl,  
Maritime Historian and Scuba Diver

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### **Biographical Information for Cris Kohl:**

Cris Kohl, the product of watching too many adventure travelogues and pirate movies as a child, first became intrigued by shipwrecks and the stories behind them after trips to Bermuda and the Florida Keys in 1974. Since then, he has explored hundreds of shipwrecks in three oceans and all five of the Great Lakes.

He is a certified Divemaster, Nitrox, and Full Cave Diver, and served as a scuba club President for three years, as a co-founder and on the Executive Board of the Windsor Chapter of Save Ontario Shipwrecks for six years, and on the Board of Directors of the Ontario Underwater Council for nine years. He is presently on the Executive Board of the Underwater Archaeological Society of Chicago and on the Technical Advisory Board of the Lake Erie Shipwreck Research Center in Ohio.

Cris Kohl's intense research and powerful narrative style characterize his nine books (including The Great Lakes Diving Guide, TITANIC, The Great Lakes Connections, and the best-selling two-volume set, The 100 Best Great Lakes Shipwrecks) and over 200 magazine and newsletter articles about Great Lakes maritime history.



He has a Master of Arts degree in History, specializing in Great Lakes Maritime History. A prolific writer and prize-winning underwater photographer, Cris Kohl's work has also appeared in the Washington Post, Immersed Magazine, Diver Magazine, Discover Diving Magazine, Sport Diver Magazine, Great Lakes Cruiser Magazine, Inland Seas and many other publications.

A popular speaker at scuba shows, shipwreck festivals, dive club meetings, history conferences, and book signings, he has often been interviewed about shipwrecks on radio and television.

Raised in Windsor, Ontario, in the very heart of the Great Lakes, Cris Kohl now resides with his wife and partner, Joan Forsberg, also a scuba diver, historian and writer, in High Lake, Illinois, just west of Chicago.